

Virtuous woman or raunchy sexpot?

IKAMARA LARASI dismantles one-sided caricatures of black women in pop culture.

Pop culture can be a good way to kick off debates

Rihanna's journey from a bungalow in

Barbados to super-stardom in New York fascinates me. She occupies a unique position as possibly the only person in pop that can rival Beyoncé, but the two are seen quite differently.

As a young black British woman with Jamaican heritage, I have clung to the narrow pop culture images of women who are supposed to represent me. Pop culture is not something we can ignore. Even if we are not plugged in, it still shapes how we perceive ourselves and each other.

Women are typically presented as objects whose sole purpose is to please men – sexually or otherwise. And with the growth of the internet, social media and new technology, these images are more insidious than ever before.

So what is the impact of these largely problematic representations? (I'm talking racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, ableist...) Jean Kilbourne, who has been analysing ads since the late 1960s, believes the sexual objectification of women, for one, is getting worse. She talks about how, as well as triggering an epidemic of eating disorders, sexual objectification in pop culture creates a context that enables violence against women and girls to flourish and powerfully perpetuates inequality.

How pop culture represents women depends on their identity. Women of colour often have very niche roles. Most can be boiled down to submissive or aggressive, de-sexualized 'mammy' trope or hyper-sexualized 'video girl'. The latter is more widespread – and more explicit – than ever, with nearly naked, grinding women appearing everywhere from the videos of relatively obscure indie rock bands, such as 'Wraith' by Peace, to dance hits such as 'Drinking from the Bottle' by Scottish DJ Calvin Harris.

A woman's ethnicity also influences how she is perceived. 'Rihanna's not just black: she's Global South black,' says Jamaican blogger and researcher Carla Moore. 'Whereas Beyoncé's "Mrs Carter" persona is received as a more appropriately sexualized character (read: sexy with a ring on it), Rihanna's origins in the "sultry" Caribbean with its "hot-blooded" people, root her identity in her sexuality.'

Carving out space

The growth of new media, while expanding the reach of pop culture, also means that we are no longer a passive audience. It has created spaces for challenging the mainstream – including feminism itself

– and opened up channels to talk about and dismantle discrimination.

Bloggers can now pick apart cultural appropriation in music videos such as singer-songwriter Avril Lavigne's 'Hello Kitty', which is set against a backdrop of silent Asian women. A hugely popular YouTube video by US-Filipino actor Tess Parás, 'Typecast', performed to the tune of New Zealander Lorde's hit 'Royals', slams stereotyped roles for women of colour actors ('sassy sidekick, thug, bitchy nerd or neighbour') in the film and TV industry.

Then there are those that take aim at other forms of sexist culture, such as the feminist parody of Robin Thicke's 'Blurred Lines'. The song provoked an outcry, accused of promoting rape culture for lyrics that muddled the waters of consent ('I know you want it'), combined with a misogynistic video. In response, New Zealand law students switched gender roles, parading near-naked men in collars on all fours, wrapped in cellophane. (YouTube views, over four million.)

It's not just a way to fight back – pop culture can also kick off debates. 'It's allowed us to start often difficult, complex discussions about power and gender equality using references which people can relate to,' explains Georgia Love of advocacy group WMW Jamaica.

'I wonder why the mainstream has worked its way into a dead end – where black women's shaking bootys are the ultimate visual representation,' reflects African feminist Jessica Horn. 'Where do you go after you have condemned more than half of the world's community?'

'The good news is that people always subvert these norms. We have a responsibility as audiences to seek out conscious and creative artists. Buy it, promote it and help sustain the alternative.'

Despite the challenge of producing and promoting anti-oppressive work of high production quality and frequency on shoestring budgets, it is beginning to happen.

It's critical to have access to alternative discourses around identity, both to challenge and to heal. Let's make new media work for us. ■

Ikamara Larasi works at Imkaan, a black feminist organization dedicated to tackling violence against women and girls. She has worked on the Rewind&Reframe partnership project, which creates a platform for young women to challenge racism and sexism in music videos. imkaan.org.uk // rewindreframe.org

Rihanna antidote:
Odaymara Cuesta from
lesbian Cuban rap duo
Las Krudas.



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